CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introducing the study

On a sunny autumn morning, a few years back, I bought a beautiful pumpkin and returned home intending to make a pumpkin pie. Surfing various food blogs for such recipes, I came across one that looked promising and started reading the instructions, when my eye was caught by the comments section, appearing right after the instructions, which began with the comment "I know this recipe. It's in Argiro's [a popular Greek chef] latest book". Unable to concentrate on the instructions anymore, I started thinking about this comment and the way it must have made the blogger[1] who had posted the recipe feel when reading it. Admittedly, to post a recipe and receive a comment by someone who claims to know not only the recipe but also its source, may not sound a very nice comment for two reasons: first, because in this way it is suggested that the recipe you have posted is not your own creation but a reproduction of someone else's creation. What is more, and perhaps worse, through this comment, it may be implied that, since you have not acknowledged the source of the recipe, you may have intentionally concealed the original source and tried to present

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1. I use the term '(food) blogger' to refer to food blog creators/authors, that is, to people who have created and run their own blogs by posting recipes and interacting with blog visitors through the comments section.

the recipe as your own. Reading on, I realised that the blogger had not replied to this comment, which left me wondering why she had not clarified her position nor justified her failure to cite the original recipe source. Instead of a reply from her, however, this first comment was followed by a long sequence of comments, all of which praised the dish and congratulated the blogger on sharing the recipe online. This rather negative first comment and the long sequence of comments of high praise that followed made me realise that, besides exchanging recipes and learning how to cook, food blogs are the loci of important work at the interpersonal level of communication, with relationships among bloggers and commenters[2] being created, maintained or terminated while exchanging comments on recipes and dishes, eating habits and cooking practices. It is this work on participants' relationships that triggered my research interest in the specific communicative context, namely food blogs and the comments section they involve. This study then is an exploration on the discourse of comments posted on Greek food blogs and the construction of relationships and identities therein. In general terms, this is a study on a community of people interested in cooking and the discursive practices in which they engage in order to construct, negotiate and maintain a network of relationships in the specific online context.

1.2 Food blogs

Food blogging, "the practice of publishing food-related posts on a blog" (Lee et al. 2014: 228), is a new way for people to exchange information about food in a non-professional capac-

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2. I use the term 'commenter' to refer to blog visitors who participate in a blog by posting comments.

ity (Lofgren 2013). Food blogs have been defined as a written, asynchronous genre of computer-mediated communication (CMC) which revolves around buying, preparing, photographing, consuming and evaluating food in all varieties and contexts (Diemer and Frobenius 2013: 53-4). In other words, "[f]ood blogs are written, asynchronous online forums dedicated to the preparation and evaluation of food in a lifestyle context" (Diemer et al. 2014: 8).

Food blogs enable ordinary people to make their food and cooking practices known to a wide audience of interested users; at the same time, they ensure user participation in the form of interactivity and collaborative creativity (O'Hara et al. 2012; Senyei 2011). Food bloggers and visitors to food blogs are people who are united in their interest in food, especially its preparation. In this sense, food blogs can be viewed as constituting an on-line 'community of practice' (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992) whose members share information about food. The concept of 'community of practice' was introduced by Lave and Wenger (1990) and was modified by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992: 464), who defined it as "an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in some common endeavour". Not all members of a community are central to the group as some may be peripheral members in terms of their involvement and affiliation (Mills 2003: 30). In its original inception, the concept concerned face-to-face interaction which involved physical co-presence of the members of the community; however, recent studies have applied the framework to contexts of digital interaction (e.g., Graham 2007; Locher 2006; Stommel 2009; but see Angouri 2015).

In the case of food blogs, the joint enterprise that brings the members of the community of practice together appears to be sharing information concerning new recipes and dishes, often resulting in the improvement of the cooking skills of all

participants concerned. Food bloggers are here to share their ideas, knowledge and experience with others, while blog visitors are here to present their own tweaked (changed) recipes, to get informed on new recipes and enrich their knowledge on various aspects of cooking. In general terms, food blogs provide a space for amateurs to share their creations and get feedback (Lofgren 2013). Viewing food blogs as a community of practice "allows us to account for certain socially shared behaviours as a function of the group context rather than a set of idiosyncrasies" (Dayter 2014: 94), which may have implications for the relational work (expected to be) performed in this context. Heeding Dayter's (2014, 2018) call for more work on small communities of people with shared interests, this study sets out to explore the shared behaviours of people who participate in food blogs (bloggers and commenters) and the interpersonal relationships thus formed.

1.3 Food blogs as a digital media communication genre

As already mentioned, Diemer and Frobenius (2013: 53) characterise food blogs as an asynchronous genre of computer-mediated communication. In more specific terms, the authors (2013: 54-69) consider food blogs to be a sub-genre of blogs, displaying the design and technical features of blogs but also containing elements of offline food-related texts; in this sense, they claim that food blogs can be seen as a hybrid genre that draws from a variety of online and offline sources (see also Herring et al. 2004: 2).

Digital media communication (DMC)[3] has frequently been

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3. The term is a variant for computer-mediated communication (CMC).

discussed as a locus for conflict and aggression (see, e.g., Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014; Hardaker 2010; Thurlow et al. 2004). As Sifianou (2019: 185) notes, this can be attributed to both the affordances of the media (see Angouri and Tseliga 2010, and Luzon 2011, 2013 among others) and the norms of interaction of online communities, as well as the expectations of their participants (Angouri and Tseliga 2010; Luzon 2013: 112). From this perspective, it would be interesting to examine whether the genre of food blogs also involves the same patterns of negatively marked behaviour as the ones associated with digital communication as a whole.

As Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2018: 137) point out, although im/politeness research has explored the newer technology-mediated contexts of interaction including communication on Facebook (e.g., Danet 2013; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2010, 2012; Graham 2007; Locher 2010; Maíz-Arévalo 2013, 2015), "for the most part, im/politeness scholars have not dealt with the implications of networked practices for the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal ties or sociability". Addressing this void, this study will examine the creation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships among food bloggers, a networked practice that has been largely neglected by im/politeness scholars and yet is worth exploring in its own right, since "food is a significant site for how individuals and societies form and express social identities" (Domingo et al. 2014: 1) and "[b]oth food and language are used to maintain and create human relationships" (Gerhart 2013: 4).

On the basis of the above, this study sets out to explore the interpersonal relationships constructed, negotiated and main-

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It is preferred in the study on account of the fact that it refers to communication in digital media in general without restricting it to *computer*-mediated communication. For a discussion on the terminology see among others, Herring et al. (2013).

tained among bloggers and commenters who participate in Greek food blogs. The theoretical framework used to uncover these relationships and explain the sociability observed in the particular online setting is that of relational work (Locher 2004; Locher and Watts 2005; Watts 2003) which concerns the study of behaviours ranging from negative to positive to merely appropriate in specific contexts of interaction.

1.4 Food blogs and theories of im/politeness

As stated in 1.3 above, food blogs have remained largely unexplored by im/politeness scholars, with the exception of two studies (Thaler-Mannheim 2014; Tzanne 2019), both of which have used Brown and Levinson's ([1978]1987) politeness theory to discuss issues of negative (Thaler-Mannheim 2014) and positive evaluation (Tzanne 2019) in the specific context.

In Thaler-Mannheim (2014), negative evaluation has been examined in 700 comments from two food blogs, one French and one Italian, that expressed disapproval, criticism and disagreement. Analysing her data with the aid of Brown and Levinson's ([1978]1987) politeness strategies, Thaler-Mannheim (2014) studied the structure of these face-threatening comments and found that only very rarely are they expressed in a direct way. By contrast, most of her comments of negative evaluation were found to contain a number of face-saving strategies, such as "giving agreement before disagreeing" or "giving reasons and explanations" (2014: 282-284). Moreover, inspecting the structural features of these comments at utterance level, Thaler-Mannheim (2014) concluded that they involved other devices with a threat-mitigating function like the use of diminutives, rhetorical questions or emoticons. Though touching upon many interesting issues related to her data,

Thaler-Mannheim (2014) considers the comments she examines as individual contributions and not as parts of a discourse exchange; consequently, she discusses face-threat and mitigations strategies without taking into account the participants' own perceptions of this threat or their reception of the interpersonal force of the comments analysed.

Comments expressing positive evaluation have been discussed by Tzanne (2019) in a study examining the discourse of 1,746 comments from a Greek food blog named *Συνταγές της παρέας* 'Recipes from/for a group of friends'. Using Brown and Levinson's ([1978]1987) politeness theory as her theoretical framework, Tzanne (2019) examines the linguistic devices participants use to construct the identity of friend/in-group and to create and maintain an atmosphere of informality, closeness and rapport. The author (2019) identifies several positive politeness strategies in her data such as "presuppose/raise/assert common ground", "notice, attend to H (his interests, wants, needs, goods)" and "seek agreement", all realising the positive politeness mechanism "Claim 'common ground'" (Brown and Levinson [1978]1987: 102). Tzanne (2019) interpreted her data based on her own understanding of the functions of the linguistic devices used, but also on the participants' expressed understanding and recognition of the force of these devices. Adopting the same discursive approach to the study of im/politeness, the present study will delve into the types and functions of the relational work performed in the comments of ten Greek food blogs.

It is worth noting that no previous study has examined food blogs in terms of the relational work that is performed in this online genre. Driven by this obvious gap in the literature, the present study intends to explore the discourse of food blog comments within the more recent discursive approaches to im/politeness and more specifically that of relational work (Locher

2004, 2006; Locher and Watts 2005; Watts 2003), which constitutes a discursive conceptualisation of im/politeness (to be explored in detail along with other seminal theories of im/politeness in chapter 2).

The discursive approach to im/politeness (e.g., Locher and Watts 2008; Mills 2003; Watts 2003) "can be credited with providing a very thorough critical appraisal of politeness theory that has entirely transformed the field of politeness research" (Ogiermann and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2019: 3). This approach has stressed the dynamic nature of communication, as it has focused on participants' own perceptions of im/politeness in long stretches of naturally occurring conversations that create their own interpretative contexts as they unfold. In this sense, a hearer's response to a speech event can provide clues concerning her/his evaluation of it and ultimately lead to the identification of the event as polite or impolite. Thus, the focus of research on im/politeness should be on lay people's conception of it as revealed in their discourse (e.g., Culpeper 2011; Eelen 2001; Watts 2003). Drawing upon the tenets of relational work, the present study aims to uncover bloggers' and commenters' own perceptions of im/politeness as they emerge from the discourse of their own postings.

As a term, relational work "highlights the involvement of at least two interactants" (Locher 2004: 51). As a discursive approach to im/politeness, "[it] comprises the entire continuum of verbal behaviour from direct, impolite, rude or aggressive interaction through to polite interaction, encompassing both appropriate and inappropriate forms of social behaviour" (Locher and Watts 2005: 11). The crucial point here is that the framework of relational work goes beyond the general dichotomy between polite and impolite behaviour and makes room for the kind of behaviour termed 'politic' and defined as "linguistic behaviour which is perceived to be appropriate to the social

constraints of the ongoing interaction" (Watts 2003: 19). In this sense, relational work acknowledges the possibility that there may be instances of verbal behaviour which are "neither polite nor impolite, but merely adequate and appropriate for the task at hand" (Locher 2004: 72).

Few studies (e.g., Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2018) have so far analysed online discourse by using the relational work approach. Yet the usefulness of the specific approach in the exploration of digital communication is stressed in Graham (2015: 312) who states that "[Relational Work] is particularly useful when examining the ways that we form relationships online, since it allows us to focus on the results of (im)polite acts in negotiating alignments (and therefore relationships) with others". Exploring my data with the aid of this discursive approach to im/politeness, I will be able to provide discursive evidence to support my interpretative claims, better outline the discursive practice of Greek food blogs in terms of what is deemed appropriate, polite or impolite behaviour in this context, and delve into the relationships food bloggers and blog visitors create through the im/polite and politic comments they post.

The study will make use of the strategies of politeness, as proposed by Brown and Levinson ([1978]1987) and impoliteness, as put forth by Culpeper (1996, 2005, 2011) and modified by Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2010a, 2018). These strategies will be used for the identification of the main types of relational work in the data (see chapter 2).

1.5 Identity construction in food blogs

It is now widely accepted that identity is something that people *do* in social activities, and not something they *are* (Chen 2002;

De Fina et al. 2006; Duszak 2002). Current approaches to the study of identity are in line with the principles of social constructionism and the essential role discourse plays in the process of constructing it. Bucholtz and Hall (2005: 585–6) view identity as "a relational and socio-cultural phenomenon that emerges and circulates in local discourse contexts of interaction rather than as a stable structure located primarily in the individual psyche". In these terms, identity is not a static feature people bring with them to the various encounters in which they become involved, but the result of a dynamic process that requires discourse and other semiotic systems for its construction (Benwell and Stokoe 2006; Wetherell 2007).

Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2009) argues that identity and im/politeness intersect at the level of discourse, specifically in the positions participants enact through the linguistic choices they make. Furthermore, in their summary of the new ways of thinking to advance the study of identity in relation to im/politeness, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Sifianou (2017: 238) affirm that im/politeness manifestations can be tied to identity (co-)construction and that im/politeness can be analysed as an index in identity construction. Concerning the ways in which identities and relational practices are performed and negotiated in digital discourse, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Bou-Franch (2019: 11) point out that "further studies of ways of doing sociability, of entextualising identity and relational practices in social media, are still needed". Responding to this need, this study focuses on the close relationship of im/politeness strategies and types of relational work to the construction of participants' identities in the corpus.

In order to construct an online identity, people filter their offline identities carefully so as to project a particular image of themselves to the virtual world (Hine 2000). Online identity construction through food-related texts is mainly about who

bloggers and blog visitors want to be seen as in relation to cooking (McGaughey 2010). Thus an important aspect of the interaction taking place in food blogs involves the construction of food-related identities by bloggers and commenters alike.

Several studies have identified and analysed food blogs as the locus for the construction of social identities (e.g., Domingo et al. 2014; McGaughey 2010; Salvio 2012). In a study of two German food blogs, McGaughey (2010) employs Goffman's (1959) framework of the presentation of self to discuss the construction of identity of the two blog authors. Despite making the interesting observation that a blog's comments section lends itself to the inspection of interaction and the relationships built among bloggers, McGaughey (2010) makes little use of the comments section of the blogs she discusses, basing her analysis mainly on the discourse blog authors produce to present themselves. In similar vein, Domingo et al. (2014) discuss the identities blog authors assume by focusing exclusively on the *About Me* sections of authors' self-presentation, while Salvio (2012) explores the discourse of food bloggers who write about many national and ethnic cuisines, adding narratives about their partners or their divorce, their children, romance or failed love affairs. In this way, food bloggers invite readers to share not only their recipes, but also their own private life. According to Salvio (2012), these bloggers construct for themselves identities that display features of middle-class status. Domingo et al. (2014) and Salvio (2012) focus on various verbal and visual aspects of personal food blogs, but neither exploits the huge potential of comments as discursive sites for the construction of social identities.

In general terms, studies that have been concerned with food-related texts, have mostly focused on food bloggers' own discourse (e.g., Diemer et al. 2014; Diemer and Frobenius 2013; Domingo et al. 2014) as it unfolds in the relevant parts of

their food blogs (e.g., *About me*) and/or (the introductions to) their recipes. Extensive preoccupation with the parts of food blogs through which bloggers provide information about themselves has resulted in the discourse of food blog comments remaining largely unexplored. By focusing on the discourse of comments of ten Greek food blogs, the present study aims to contribute towards addressing this gap and foreground the important role comments play in the creation of interpersonal relationships among participants and the construction of their online identities.

The set of identities that emerges from the corpus as relevant to food blogs relates to (amateur) cooking which is the centre of interest in all ten blogs examined. Most participants are seen to upload recipes which they have taken from other sources; in such cases, they usually state where they have taken the recipe from or who the original creator of the recipe is (e.g., *αυτή τη συνταγή μου την έδωσε μια θεία μου* 'I was given this recipe by an aunt of mine', *Από το βιβλίο της Εύας Βουτσινά για το ψωμί* 'From Eva Voutsina's book on bread'). Participants who make it clear that they have neither created the recipe themselves nor changed it in some way construct for themselves the identity of what I call *reproducer*. A fundamental value related to this identity seems to be the acknowledgment of recipe sources, which emerges as a norm in this context, and often results in offence and negative behaviour if breached (see chapter 4). Other important values related to this identity seem to be truthfulness and accuracy when providing sources, which add credibility to the recipes and provoke strong criticism when absent (see chapter 4).

Only a few participants construct the identity of *creator* by stating explicitly in their comments that the dish they post is their own creation (e.g., *αυτή την ομελέτα την εμπνεύστηκα μόνη μου* 'I created this omelette myself'), while several others

who do not provide the source of their recipe in any way also emerge, by implication, as recipe creators. Most commonly, bloggers, but mainly commenters, construct the identity of what I call *tweakers*, that is, participants who post their own variations of existing recipes. This identity emerges when recipe posters state the change (tweak) in their presentation of the recipe (e.g., *τη συνταγή την προσάρμοσα στις προτιμήσεις της οικογένειάς μου* 'I adapted this recipe to my family's preferences'), or implicitly with the aid of grammar, that is, by presenting themselves as 'agents' or 'actors' in action processes (*πρόσθεσα λίγο τυρί* 'I added some cheese' / *αντί για πιπεριές έβαλα κρεμμύδι* 'I used onion instead of peppers'). As a blogger (Marina,[4] Blogger 1) says, *Διαβάζω, μαθαίνω νέα μαγειρικά κόλπα, μετατρέπω, εφευρίσκω δικά μου!* 'I read, I learn new cooking tricks, I tweak, I invent my own [tricks]!'. Of note is the fact that this blogger is the only one to include a category termed "Tweaks" in her blog.

In terms of face considerations, a 'creator' or a 'tweaker' are identities that involve a higher degree of commitment and greater responsibility for the dish they propose than a simple reproducer of a recipe. In this sense, these identities are probably more exposed to, and more vulnerable to offensive comments. On the other hand, it is reasonable to argue that these same identities are more powerful than reproducers on account of the degree of originality and creativity they display. In such cases, it is the power of knowledge and expertise that prevails.

Since the main activity of food bloggers is to upload and share recipes with the perceived audience, it can be easily inferred that there is a lot of assessment in the specific digital genre, concerning not only recipes but also participants'

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4. Bloggers' names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

behaviour. This ties in with Graham and Hardaker's (2017: 791) observation that digital communication continually invites people to assess others and put these assessments on record by using buttons such as "Like", "Share", "Block" or "Report Abuse". In the case of food blogs, assessment is also recorded in the many comments that evaluate recipes, cooking and eating practices, with commenters constructing the identity of *evaluator*. In terms of power relations, the evaluator of a recipe can be seen as a person with enough knowledge to assess a dish. In this sense, evaluators can be viewed as occupying a more powerful position than recipe posters, the recipients of the evaluation. This asymmetry may pose difficulties to commenters related to face considerations, as an unfavourable evaluation on their part may be harmful not only for the blogger but also for their own face. As will be argued later (chapters 3 and 4), commenters manage to mitigate this face threat by including positive politeness strategies in their evaluative comments through which they cultivate in-groupness and solidarity among interactants.

In addition to food-related identities, the corpus examined in this study was found to involve the construction of other identities (e.g., friend, in-group) that concern the relationship that is cultivated between participants in terms of social distance, or the amount of knowledge interactants possess on certain issues (e.g., expert). In the context of food blogs, where power is not institutionally given, participants were observed to use all types of marked and unmarked relational work to negotiate the distribution of power in their exchange of comments, constructing different identities each time. In my analysis (chapters 3 and 4), I will consider the relevance of relational work to the construction and emergence of different identities, all of which revolve around the negotiation of power in the encounter.